

Historic Books: Aurora Australis by Ernest Shackleton

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"Aurora Australis," by Ernest Shackleton was the first book written, printed, illustrated, and bound on the continent of Antarctica.

Ernest Shackleton oversaw the production of "Aurora Australis" during his 1908-1909 polar exploration voyage. There were two main reasons why he wanted to publish a book in Antarctica.

First, the expedition team was forced to spend the winter in cramped quarters on Ross Island in the McMurdo Sound. Shackleton knew from prior experience that when his men were cooped up with nothing to do tempers tended to flare explosively. One of his major ways of preventing this was putting together "cultural activities" to keep the men busy. As part of the process of creating "Aurora Australis" he encouraged his men to write poetry or prose for inclusion in the book. In the end, his men wrote ten chapters covering 120 pages. The book is a sort of anthology of the North, containing three poems, and seven pieces of prose, both fiction and non-fiction. There are also a number of illustrations and plates. The writing, illustrating, and publishing of the book served its purpose of keeping Shackleton's men busy and productive during the otherwise dull winter in Antarctica.

The second reason why Shackleton produced Aurora Australis was to raise money. Shackleton was always interested in getting more money for future exploratory voyages. He probably hoped that the fact that this was the first book produced entirely in Antarctica would make it a curiosity that people would be willing to purchase for high prices. Indeed, his hopes were eventually realized. Today, original copies of Aurora Australis are sold for sums ranging from \$50000 to \$75000. This is partly due to the age and uniqueness of the book, but also due to its extreme rarity. Somewhere between ninety to one-hundred copies of the book were created, and of these only about thirty are known to have been fully bound. At any rate, despite the high value of original copies of Aurora Australis today, they didn't bring any money to Shackleton. He ended up distributing the copies of Aurora Australis to members of the expedition and benefactors who had contributed to the expedition.

The work involved in producing Aurora Australis was very intensive. To begin with Shackleton had to get the equipment that would be needed to create the plates for printing, and to bind finished copies of the book. Fortunately, most of the equipment was donated by the printing firm Messrs. Joseph Causton and Sons, Limited. This firm also gave the polar expeditionists three weeks of training in the art of printing, and a special penguin stamp to be used on the book's binding.

Once the equipment was procured and set up, the much harder work of printing began. For one thing, none of the men were experienced at printing. There only knowledge of it was the three weeks of training given to them by the printing firm

that had provided the equipment. They also discovered other problems. The extreme cold thickened the ink like molasses, rendering it useless for printing. To restore its viscosity, the men had to warm it using the flame of a candle. But then they left the candle in place for too long and melted the only inking roller on the continent!

The materials used to bind each copy of the book were very unique to say the least. Shackleton's men ended up using what they had: harness leather for the book spines, and lightweight venesta wood boards from packing crates for the book covers. This wood was a three-layered composite made of oak or chestnut glued together with waterproof cement. Existing originals of the book still bear the packing crates stenciled labels: "Butter," "Bottled F(ruit)."

There are two variants of *Aurora Australis*. The first edition of the book contains only ten photographic plates, but has an extra page of text. The second edition of the book has eleven plates. After a comparison of the two editions, one expert has theorized that the book originally contained a passage that would be very offensive to several important contributors to the voyage. After removing the passage, it was necessary to fill the empty space with another photographic plate.

Aurora Australis will stand as a historic book because of the unique conditions under which it was printed.

SOURCE: <http://inkweaver-review.blogspot.com/2009/05/historic-books-aurora-australis-by.html>